

Time After Time. by Genevie

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Summary:

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Which is why he's at the Snowball.

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Author's Note:

Inspiration: https://www.reddit.com/r/StrangerThings/comments/559nhi/snowball_my_third_digital_painting_in_the_series/

Will has a way of knowing things now. Like he can sense the pulse of the world and feel it throbbing through the veins of the living, carried in the vibrations of sound. He says it has something to do with electricity and kinetic energy; that his time in the upside-down has made him more attuned to both. Even though Mike doesn't quite understand why, he knows that when Will insists that something should happen, he needs to help make it happen.

Which is why he's at the Snowball.

He doesn't want to be here. There are too many girls in pretty dresses, too many boys gathering the nerve to ask them to dance, too many thoughts swirling in his mind—*she should be here*, and *I promised*, and *it isn't fair*. Thirty minutes into the dance, he decides he's going to leave. Fifteen minutes later, he commits to that decision. And about a few minutes after that, Will grabs him by the elbow and tells him to come with him.

The halls are dark and empty, and the music that had seemed so loud in the gymnasium barely reaches them as they walk the familiar path towards Mr Clarke's classroom. “After this, we're going home,” Mike tells him, and Will says that's fine. He just needs to be here for this one thing, this one moment.

When they arrive, Will says, “Okay, close your eyes,” and Mike obliges him. There is something serious to Will's voice, something mildly concerned. He isn't playing around. He's not trying to set up a surprise. He deserves to be trusted.

The moment they pass through the door, Mike is overwhelmed by warm feelings of familiarity. It's an almost saccharine sensation; he's been disappointed by hope so many times before that he's developed

an aversion to it. He doesn't want to put any faith into these feelings and he is, at first, scared of continuing forwards into the room. But then he thinks, *Will knows things*, and he forgets how to be sceptical. He forgets how it feels to grieve. As Will guides him into position—*take a step forward, no, a smaller step than that, more like three inches, okay, now turn around 45 degrees, good, hold out your hand*—he obeys on auto-pilot, his mind floating so high above his head that it might as well have cleared the roof. Might as well be halfway to the stars.

For a while nothing happens. Then all of Mike's senses rush him at once. Music begins to play, distorted by static but still clear enough that he can make out the lyrics. *Lying in my bed I hear the clock tick and think of you. Caught up in circles of confusion is nothing new*. The air wraps cold and damp around his skin. It smells of rain, of mildew, mildly of decay. When he breathes through his mouth he tastes something metallic and bitter, so he tries to breathe only through his nose.

Gentle fingers press into his extended palm and he wraps his own around them. There is a warm touch on his opposite shoulder. A voice, soft and stilted and so familiar that it hurts to hear it again in the relieving way that a massage aches says, “Like this,” and Will says, “Yeah, exactly like that,” and Mike reaches out, his eyes still closed, to rest the hand Eleven isn't holding on her waist.

“Hi, Mike,” she says.

“You're here.”

“Yes.”

“You're really here.”

He wants to pull her close but he didn't promise her a hug, he promised her a dance, and so he guides her in tune to the song. They are both clumsy, both unsure, but because they are both present in the same sphere of space, none of that matters. The moment is perfect.

“So,” he says, “Um,” he says, “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Mike's here.”

“No, I mean—“ he begins. Whatever Eleven is enduring, she doesn't want to think about it now, and so he holds himself back from worrying about her, from making her focus on bad things, bad places, bad people. “That's right. I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Can I open my eyes?” he asks, and when Eleven tells him no, he closes them even tighter. He wants to see her. Desperately. Wants to know that she's looking well, wants to remind himself of the curve of her smile and the light in her eyes. But more than that, he wants her to be comfortable.

“This is dancing?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it's called slow dancing. It's what people who are, um...”

“More than friends?”

“Yeah. It's what they do. What we do. And, um, I know this isn't the actual Snowball but I like it better. Do you?”

He feels ridiculous for asking her that, because how would she know which one she likes better? But Eleven doesn't treat it like it's a bad question. “It's nice,” she says.

As the song approaches its end—*if you're lost, you can look and you will find me, time after time*—the air begins to warm again, and Eleven's touch begins to cool. She apologises, softly, and Mike reaches out blind to wipe away the blood that he's sure he'll find underneath her nose. All he feels are her tears.

“It's okay,” he says, and knowing that they don't have much time left he pulls her into a hug. He does not think that maybe she feels thinner than before; he thinks about how solid and real and alive she is in his arms. And he does not wonder why she is trembling; he thinks about how she's like a building standing at the epicentre of an earthquake, refusing to collapse. And he does not think about how he's going to lose her again, but rather about how he's going to find

her, time after time, until she's back for good. "We're going to help you, El. Okay? I promise."

"Yes," she says, and all too soon she is gone.

Mike doesn't open his eyes right away. There are appearances to maintain, tears to hold back. If he allows himself to be upset now, who knows how long it will take him to stop crying? And he has things to do. He has a rescue to plan. When he does open them again, they lock onto Will, who's swaying slightly on his feet, gripping onto Mr Clarke's desk with white knuckles, a drop of blood working its way from his nostril to his chin.

"Are you okay?" Will asks before Mike can find the right words, the right thoughts—before he can recover enough from the shock of Eleven's presence to be concerned for him, too. "You're not mad that we kept her a secret, are you? We wanted to be sure—"

"You brought her back."

"Yeah, but not for very long."

"But you brought her back. It was really her. She was really here." Before Will can answer, he adds, "I promised her we'd help her. We can do that, right? I didn't make a promise I can't keep?"

And Will, smiling, says, "You totally didn't," and Mike believes him. Will has a way of knowing things, now.